

Clinton Touts Haiti's Investment Potential



Photo: Reuters

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton speaks during the Clinton Global Initiative in New York September 19, 2011

Former U.S. president Bill Clinton says Haiti has the potential for sparking competition in the Caribbean that would transform the island nation into a regional leader. He made the prediction in New York City at the yearly Clinton Global Initiative, or CGI, a leadership forum that tackles some of the world's most pressing problems.

Speaking at a CGI Haiti Investment Workshop on the eve of the forum's official start, Clinton said Haiti's advantage as a source of cheap labor is offset by the country's energy costs.

Power source

He said Haitian electricity rates are the highest of any country in the Caribbean, a region with the most expensive electricity in the world. The reason, he says, is the importation of heavy fuels.

Clinton called that insane because there are alternatives.

"If we maximized their potential for hydropower, for agricultural waste, and for solar and for wind - you did it all - then you can have backup generators on the days the wind did not blow and the sun did not shine," noted Clinton; "but the cost for manufacturers and for all other businesses would drop

dramatically."

Clinton said other Caribbean nations would be forced to follow Haiti's energy lead, boosting the fortunes of all.

Failed leadership

Haitian President Michel Martelly said his country must overcome a legacy of "40 years of failed leadership", which impoverished the people and frightened investors. Martelly said he will submit two bills to the Haitian Congress to reduce government red tape to improve the investment climate.

"One will shorten the time it takes to open a business, and the other one, to shorten the time it takes to get a construction permit," Martelly said.

Haiti suffered a devastating earthquake in January 2010. Martelly says the tragedy claimed more than 300,000 lives, destroyed 30 percent of the country's buildings and inflicted a total of \$30 billion in losses.

Competition

Former president Clinton praised Martelly's plan to increase Haiti's ability to compete for investors by pursuing the rule of law and making sure that contracts are honored.

"I do not want to minimize this. This is a huge, huge change for Haiti that I predict to you - if they do it right - they will move to the top in the region and then they will spark this race all over the Caribbean, where people will try making it a user-friendly place instead of a pain," Clinton said.

A number of business leaders participated in the workshop, which examined Haiti's investment potential in agriculture, manufacturing and tourism. President Martelly said his country will host an investors' conference in November.